

# The Optimum Conditions of Foreign Languages in Primary Education

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**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to review the primary language learning situation in Europe and shed light on the benefits it carries. Early language learning is the biggest policy development in education and has developed in rapid speed over the past 30 years; this article considers the effects and advantages of the optimum condition of an early start, the objective of which it is to reinforce the European education scene.

**Keywords:** early language learning, language education policy, professional development, review.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to facilitate communication and interaction, strengthen and promote co-operation, mobility, trade and the European economy, language learning is essential. However, English has overwhelmingly become the main focus of Foreign Language Learners (FLL) across Europe in recent years (EACEA, 2008). The developing interest in early language learning is a mirror image of the growing number of children learning languages at primary level. The selection of a particular early language learning model is allegedly decided by a combination of aspects, such as “the time available for language learning, perceived and realised intensity, material and financial input, starting age, social and geographical settings, as well as the language competence of the teacher” (Edelenbos et al., 2006: 14).

This paper will review concepts of the early language educational practice and effective policies that could bring out the advantages of early language instruction to the surface. The main aim is to shed light on the benefits of early language learning when its implementation is handled in such a manner that children and teachers can enjoy its positive outcomes.

## THE LANGUAGE LEARNING BACKGROUND WITHIN EUROPE

Early foreign language learning has become a priority within the European Union. National governments throughout Europe, government agencies and Ministries of Education are committed to promoting the concept nationwide. The commitment to the early commencement of language learning and multilingualism (reiterated in the European Commission’s White Paper, 1995) and the development of life-long learning as a vital concept in Europe’s educational policy have made early language learning a point of great interest amongst governmental programmes and actions.

According to EACEA (2008), in many European countries, the notion of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) at primary schools, implies relatively limited amounts of time per week from teachers who are neither highly fluent nor specialise in language learning, with the goal of developing an initial competence. However, the situation seems to be steadily improving in various countries (ELLiE, 2011). Even though the plan of including a foreign language in the primary curriculum is beneficial since it entails a global perspective, positive attitudes to other cultures assist overcoming prejudice and discrimination. Great complexity can occur due to diverse approaches, views and aims. There may well be an ideal scenario in terms of the age of the child, the allocation of time and the skill of the teacher “but if we are to succeed in giving primary children the benefits of MFL, we have to be realistic and accept that practice has to be shaped by actual circumstances”. This focal point is worth considering since many language learners practice the Foreign Language (FL) within the limits of the classroom. The European Commission Action Plan 2004-2006 has

recommended that “member states should move towards ensuring that foreign language learning at primary should be effective” (Commission of the European Communities, 2003:7) and it is essential that the learning process be handled in such a way that it will benefit children learning languages. There are European countries that are characterised by top-down research projects, in which decision-makers have aimed to develop appropriate curriculum programmes for young learners and have traditionally wanted to gain insights, whereas, in other European countries, foreign language learning is introduced as a result of pressure from parents, politicians and/or other interested parties. Lessons may be obligatory upon schools and carried out with minimal supervision and control from educational authorities (Nikolov & Curtain, 2000). There is no doubt that the trend of an early start is more complicated than some may acknowledge. What makes it so complex is not just teaching practices and the methodology used in the language classroom, or any debate about the most appropriate age to begin learning an FL, but the fact that behind the linguistic exterior hide political and sociocultural perspectives, which influence the success or failure of the field. Enever and Moon (2009), have stated that political demands and changes of leadership can influence or change stable policy formation and continuity. The questions we must prompt ourselves to ask are, whether these perspectives include pedagogical language learning methods successful enough to equip children for the future and benefit their present, and how political and socio-cultural perspectives affect the progress of early language learning in each country.

## THE EFL POLICY AND OPTIMUM STARTING AGE

Despite the increasing interest in early

language learning, there continue to be difficulties in the processes of implementation and debates regarding the appropriate starting age and the necessary conditions for ongoing success. Early attempts of foreign language instruction are often based on the claim that ‘younger is better’, and that the child is likely to prevail in competency because he/she is “endowed with certain language learning abilities that will allow him/her to become a more proficient user of the language” (Legutke et al, 2009:15). On the other hand, Nikolov (2009:2) argues that:

[...] young learners are widely perceived to acquire languages in a qualitatively different way from adolescents and adults. Children, before a certain age seem to pick up a new language with ease and success, whereas older learners often fail to do so.

Studies of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) have occupied neurolinguists who support a neurofunctional perspective on language which “attempts to characterise the neurolinguistic information processing systems responsible for the development and use of language” (Lamendella, 1979:5). The study of a foreign language in primary school, and perseverance in such a study for several years, increases students’ chances of developing a high level of proficiency, meaning that students reach an advanced level of communicative competence and cultural understanding. Furthermore, Curtain (1990) argues that the challenge children face when exposed to a foreign language at school enhances cognitive development. The young learners experience a certain learning strategy that is foreign to their area of understanding, a conflict, which becomes the mechanism of new thinking. Children are believed to be cognitively open to learning a foreign language, as opposed to adults. Johnstone argues that young language learners have extra time available overall, which gives them ample opportunities to form fruitful links between their L1 and the L2, a procedure that can assist in the development of metalinguistic awareness. Furthermore, language learning at a young age can allow children to integrate their learning of an L2 into their cognitive, social, emotional and cultural growth, hence, to exercise a positive and formative influence on their sense of identity. With older beginners, by contrast, their identity may have already largely been formed, in which case, language learning and L2 exposure will have little influence if for-

eign language learning begins later on.

Singleton (2005) argues that in language learning, younger is better in the long run; there are, nevertheless, many exceptions noting that an adult may be successful in a language even though they may have started learning it well into adulthood. Singleton and Ryan (2004) reach the conclusion that those who experience language learning at an early stage were shown to have reached higher levels of proficiency than those who had begun in puberty. Nonetheless, studies have demonstrated older children’s superiority in grasping L2 grammar, syntax and morphology where young learners are outperformed (Ekstrand, 1976). Moon (2005) suggests that the claim of ‘younger is better’ can be considered controversial, since there is evidence that adolescents and adults are more efficient learners than children. However, she argues that children have the advantage of having sensitivity to pronunciation. Pinter (2006:29) supports this argument and is in favour of the position that young children hold an “intuitive grasp of language and their ability to be more attuned to the phonological system of the new languages and enjoy copying new sounds and patterns of intonation”. Driscoll and Frost (1999) explain that young learners have an innate ability to imitate sounds more accurately, compared to older language learners. Nonetheless, there is a risk of not being given the opportunity to use this instinct if their teachers lack in fluency. On the other hand, Edelenbos et al. (2006), claim that an optimum starting age has not yet been established. An early start to language learning can offer the child an overall longer period of learning and a prospective of influencing their personal development whilst in a formative stage. Nonetheless, an early start is unlikely to make a spectacular difference. Children have more chances of becoming successful and motivated language learners if their early start comes with quality teaching.

## THE LANGUAGE TEACHER OF THE YOUNG LEARNER

It is vital, when discussing the outcome of early language learning, to focus on those who deliver the language lesson and are responsible for the numerous children in Europe, and beyond, who embark on the journey of foreign language education. Ideally, the language teacher introduces the child to the foreign language and helps him/her become a successful foreign language user within a relaxed and comfortable environ-

ment. Singleton and Ryan (2004) argue that an early exposure to the foreign language will result to positive outcomes. Students will have to take on various stages in order to reach a level of confidence to become successful language learners. This cannot be achieved without the encouragement of the adults around them, starting from their families to their teachers at school (Giannikas, 2011). In order to achieve successful language learning in the primary level, the educator is required to supply pupils with the aspiration to acquire the knowledge and ability to engage in language learning tasks. All areas of education require teaching professionals that are well-trained. This is considered a prerequisite to quality education. As Legutke et al (2009) have argued, governments advocate the implementation of primary language learning, nevertheless, they are reluctant to offer funding to teachers of pre- and in-service level.

It can be argued that if language teachers do not undergo the necessary training to teach in the primary level, the optimum conditions to early language learning will not be met. The role of the governments’ and parents’ strong will to integrate language learning in primary schools cannot be ignored, however, it is up to the teachers to execute this challenging operation. Teachers cannot be expected to approach early language teaching without undertaking the appropriate pre/in-service training that would eventually benefit their students and prepare them for their next level of language learning in secondary school (Giannikas, 2013a). Language educators need to be aware of the suitable teaching methodologies and have a good command of the language to feel comfortable within the classroom, and positively affect their learners. According to Rixon (2000:4) the teachers’ command of the foreign language can affect the type of language the students are provided with and the methodology preferred and adopted. The correct approach of teaching children within a comfortable and pleasant environment and providing them with valuable knowledge can increase their levels of motivation and enthusiasm and benefit their language learning. It can easily be seen that a teacher who lacks confidence and fluency in the language is unlikely to be able to set up the occasions for genuine interaction (Giannikas, 2013b). These factors are crucial for the young learner. Firstly, it is widely accepted that one area in which young learners are



superior is in their ability to imitate a pronunciation model, as previously mentioned. There is a strong case, therefore, to ensure that the models available are acceptable ones. Secondly, without adequate opportunities to engage in genuine interaction with other users of the foreign language, another capacity of young language learning will go to waste.

Teachers have the responsibility of providing major language input to young language learners. It is necessary for language educators of this age group to have interactive skills with the purpose of introducing activity-based and interactive methods, as well as the appropriate teaching strategies that will generate interest in learning. According to Moon (2005), these methods are more appropriate for teaching children a foreign language. An early phase of appropriate language instruction can equip children with a positive outlook, so the methods in question need to be compatible with their linguistic and cognitive levels. Children are more than capable of learning a foreign language, however, depending on the age factor alone can be a risk with negative outcomes. According to Moon (2005: 5):

[...] there are many other important factors to consider when deciding whether to begin English early. Unless you have enough time, appropriate materials and curriculum, well trained and competent teachers, there is a high risk that very little is gained by starting younger and quite a lot lost in terms of resources, maybe frustrated teachers and young learners who get demotivated early and yet know they have to continue with English into secondary school.

## CONCLUSION

This paper was meant to present a review of the theoretical perspectives of the optimum starting age of FLL and the optimum conditions that would provide great value to language education within the context of Europe. One could argue that there is no empirical evidence which proves that an early start is better than a later one (Nikolov, 2000), however an early start alone is not suffice to bring about the benefits of an early start and lead young language learners to a successful outcome. As Nikolov (2000) has argued, it is important to set realistic goals for the implementation of early language education. If the early language learning programmes are not well-planned and realistic, the integration of FL would not be success-

ful. Finally it is essential to emphasise the teacher's role in the success of early language programmes. It is necessary that primary language teachers undergo the necessary training in order to be able to apply relevant classroom techniques, which will motivate and intrigue their young learners. If certain measures are not met, the funds and efforts of integrating languages in the primary curriculum could be lost.

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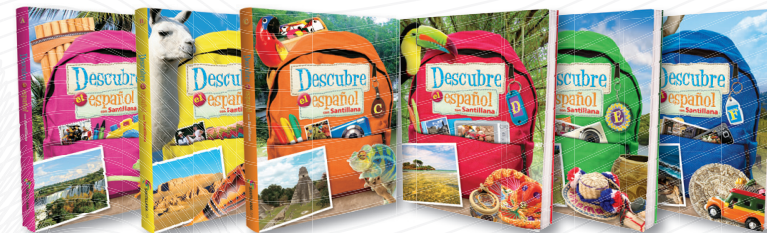


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